

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**

Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on February 7, 2010 (5 Epiphany, Year C)

Jesus was about as good a fisherman as, well, a carpenter. That's what Peter and his fellow fishermen must have been thinking when Jesus shows up and offers them some fishing advice. That's like a football player telling a violinist how to play a concerto. (And there's my one and only football reference on this Super Bowl Sunday).

Peter and the guys had already been out all night. And it must have been an exhausting and frustrating night out on the Lake of Gennesaret. Over and over again they'd tossed out their nets and hauled them back in. And time and time again they came up empty. Muscles ache, the spirit is broken, and they have nothing to show for it. There are no fish. Which is a problem because these aren't recreational fishermen. They're not weekend warriors out to catch some fish so they'll have stories to tell back at the Hingham Yacht Club. Their very livelihood depended upon catching fish. And their nets came back empty.

Soon after returning from this failed fishing trip, Jesus shows up on the shore. At this point in Luke's gospel, Jesus has yet to call any disciples. He's been born, baptized, tempted in the wilderness, and driven out of his hometown. Yet he's already gained a reputation as a great teacher. A large crowd quickly gathers to hear his message and soon everyone is pressing in on him. So Jesus borrows Peter's boat to speak to the crowd from the water. Which is a good strategy because it allows everyone on the banks to see and hear him.

Then, when he finishes speaking to the crowd, that unusual exchange takes place between Jesus and Peter: A carpenter telling a fisherman how to fish. And I can't imagine the advice is very welcome. Jesus imparts the following wisdom, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Well, yes, that's typically how it works. I'm not much of a fisherman but even I know that in order to catch fish you must go out in a boat and drop your nets into the water. Peter had been doing just this all night with no success. In fact, Peter had been fishing his entire life. If there was one thing that Peter knew, it was fishing. Yet along comes Jesus to state the obvious: "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." This must have irritated Peter. 'Can't this guy stick to the things he knows like carpentry and eternal salvation?' Probably biting his lip, Peter replies, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing." If even Peter comes back empty, there must really be no fish.

But perhaps to humor Jesus or to show him, Peter says "Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." And we all know what happened – they ended up with a record haul; a load of fish so abundant that the boat nearly sank.

Some might call this coincidence; or dumb luck. Perhaps a school of fish just happened to swim by at that precise moment. You can easily explain these things away. But I'd call it the spirituality of the unexpected. Peter and his companions assumed they'd bring up empty nets and just get on with their day and their lives. But Jesus has something else in store for them. He

twists their expectations so radically that the course of their lives is irrevocably altered. And it's not about the great abundance of fish; that's just a sign. This story is about call. The calling of Peter and James and John as disciples of Jesus.

Now I can't say this enough; you may get sick of me saying this after awhile: but call is not the exclusive realm of those called to ordained ministry. We are all called by Jesus Christ to a life of discipleship. Primarily we're called to be Christians; to follow Jesus with all our heart and mind and soul and to worship him. This gets played out in many ways but it all points back to God. This morning we hear the call stories of Isaiah and Paul in addition to Peter and his friends. And they challenge us to think about the ways we are called in our own lives. For some it's a vocation; for others it's a particular ministry at church or in the community. But make no mistake: God has called you in a particularly unique way just as much as God called those initial disciples of Jesus.

So as soon as they bring the fish to shore, Jesus invites Peter, James, and John to drop their nets, even as they're teeming with fish, and to follow him. The spirituality of the unexpected. These three thought they'd be fishing again the next day and the day after that and the day after that. And they were: but for people, not fish. They were to join Jesus on his mission to share the message of salvation; to heal the sick and give sight to the blind; to proclaim forgiveness for the repentance of sin. To join with him in something so large it was beyond their human capacity to comprehend; at least during Jesus' mortal life.

And Jesus often calls us to unexpected places in our own lives. We need to remain open to seeing it. But think about the places you've ended up; the lives that you have impacted over the years. Is it fate? Or is it God? Things don't always go according to plan. And we're often reminded that this life is not about our plans for God but rather God's plan for us.

But we have to remain open to the Spirit to be surprised by the Spirit. As human beings we all play a role in the call process. The disciples weren't automatons, dropping their nets as if they were robots, and following Jesus like zombies in a sci-fi thriller. They probably struggled with the decision even as they followed Jesus; they surely reflected upon what they had to leave behind: family, friends, the comfort of the familiar. Jesus called them in the fullness of their humanity; they brought along their fears, their sinfulness, their expectations. Like many of the stories of call in Scripture, Peter is reluctant. So were Moses and Isaiah and Jeremiah and Paul, among others. There's often a protestation of unworthiness. But God doesn't call the perfect – if so there would be no prophets or disciples – he calls us in the very imperfection of our humanity. It's the spirituality of the unexpected.

But beware, because discipleship leads you to unexpected places. I never thought I'd end up in a place called Hingham, Massachusetts. Discipleship leads you to ministries and encounters that you could never have imagined. There are things that must be left behind and there are new surprises and joys that await. And if you follow this Christian path for a lifetime you even begin to expect the unexpected. Which is just about the right approach for each one of us.